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ABSTRACT

This paper, via a collection of personal stories, describes two educators' experiences of homophobia in the world of education. The paper uses stories from their experiences as students, teacher candidates, professional teachers, and graduate students. According to the paper, this work is unique in educational research in that it seeks to represent the educators' lived experiences and personal ways of knowing in an authentic, holistic manner. The paper explains that the stories were collected in an investigation of how the educators' personal and professional lives have been shaped by homophobia, sexism, and other oppressive forces. It uses reported speech, available narrative/category-bound activities (c-b-a), evaluation, performance/reenactment, and orientation and frame as specific tools to enable the examination of the meaning and functions of personal narrative in education. It focuses on context as well as text to explore the relationships between the narrative and the event and to examine the interactions of speakers and listeners. These tools and modes of analysis lead the two educators to look at the juxtaposition of "taleworld" and "storyrealm." (Contains 26 references.) (BT)

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Running head: NONE OF THE ABOVE

None of the Above:

Silence and Invisibility in the Lives of Two Gay Educators

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SO 032 705

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None of the Above:

Silence and Invisibility in the Lives of Two Gay Educators

The people who come to see us bring us their stories. They hope they tell them well enough so that we understand the truth of their lives. They hope we know how to interpret their stories correctly. We have to remember that what we hear is their story. (Coles, p. 8)

Introduction

As an educator of medical students, Coles has come to appreciate the power and importance of stories. Our work involves sharing our stories. We offer them as representations of our lives. It is our hope that our interpretations are truthful, allowing the reader to understand our realities. We have collected personal stories that describe our experiences of homophobia in the world of education. We tell stories from our experiences as students, teacher candidates, professional teachers, and graduate students. Unlike studies of gays and lesbians in the past, our work is unique in educational research in that it seeks to represent our lived experiences and personal ways of knowing in an authentic, holistic manner. We collected our stories in an effort to investigate how our personal and professional lives have been shaped by homophobia, sexism, and other oppressive forces. As a lesbian teacher from an east coast background and a gay male teacher from rural Ohio, our stories of schooling, teacher preparation, teaching, and graduate study vary greatly. Our narratives are about surviving in educational settings, negotiating sexual identity, and naming our struggles. We believe the process of generating these stories has given us the opportunity to give voice to what was previously silenced and make visible that which is usually only marginally seen. Our underlying assumption is that "narratives told in everyday life are often claimed to be a communicative salve - a way to make meaning out of chaos and show people that they are not alone and that they share experiences" (Shuman, in press). We are looking for evidence that telling our stories will have an emancipatory or healing effect, but

question if we are merely reinscribing our own marginality.

Our stories take the form of journal entries. Journal writing is a recognized method in qualitative educational research and offers suitable means to capture life experience (Dillard, 1996). Clandinin and Connelly (1994) indicate that journal writers "weave together accounts of the private and the professional, capturing fragments of experience in attempts to sort themselves out" (p. 421). Our research constitutes an attempt on our part to "sort" ourselves out as gay educators. Through both the content of our journal entries and the process of journaling itself, we are trying to reassemble the fragmented stories of our past and reconstruct our present and future lives. Our hope is that our storytelling and narrative inquiry might lead us to better understand how to educate, heal, and unite the educational community about issues of sexuality.

Educational practices are deeply personal matters, inexorably linked to identity and life experience. Pagano (1991) sees biography and storytelling as a way to provide "a passage between theory and practice and to make it possible for students to develop the habit of critical self-reflection" (p.193). Personal narratives enable us to construct meaningful theories based on our life experiences. Disclosure of personal stories and guided reflection leads to deeper analysis of the dynamics of education. Teaching and learning do not occur in a vacuum; it is impossible to interact with children in a classroom on a daily basis without inviting stories. Children and adults are natural storytellers (Brody, Witherell, Donalds, & Lundblad, 1991) and most teachers would agree that the sharing of stories is an effective way to make educational experiences more meaningful for children. There does not seem to be any evidence that the same does not hold true for adults. In fact, Gomez and Abt-Perkins (1993) found the telling of stories to be an effective way to help teacher candidates, teachers, and graduate professionals reflect on their teaching and

gain an appreciation for on-going self-examination. However, self-examination is only the beginning. We look to folklorists and ethnographers for insight into how to find meaning in and generate theory from personal narrative

After reviewing several of the tools available for understanding narratives, we have selected pertinent ones that help us "think" about our stories. We chose reported speech, available narrative/category-bound activities (c-b-a), evaluation, performance/reenactment, and orientation and frame. These specific tools and others will enable us to examine the meaning and functions of personal narrative in education. Our work calls us to focus on context as well as text, to explore the relationships between the narrative and the event, and to examine the interactions of speakers and listeners. The tools we rely upon work together as a unified whole, yet each one demonstrates specific aspects of the narrative. They are complementary and dependent on each other and equally important to our analysis of these stories. For instance, reported speech often functions as evaluation and enriches reenactment. Similarly, C-B-A's and available narrative become recognizable through orientation and frame.

All of these tools and modes of analysis lead us to look at the juxtaposition of taleworld and storyrealm. Taleworld describes the time and space in which our stories take place. For us, these are settings such as elementary and high schools, student-teaching placements, and graduate courses. Storyrealm describes the time and space in which we tell our stories. We tell our stories as part of a research project as well as for personal growth. This is the most basic explanation of our storyrealm; however, a deeper contextualization is involved. How is the disconnect between taleworld and storyrealm manifested in our narratives? The story realm we have created feels liberating and makes it safe for us to delve into the tale world of our sometimes painful personal

stories. The taleworld still exists for us, others like us, and future generations. Does the existence of our storyrealm make the taleworld more available and tellable?

Using The Tools

Reported speech, an internal structure of narrative, allows for more than one voice to be heard in a story. The use of reported speech brings up issues related to credibility, authority, truth, and corroboration. Additionally, reported speech can make present the scene of the story, thus making the narrative more of a reenactment. Evaluation and emotion are also important aspects of the power of reported speech in personal narratives.

In our stories reported speech builds emotion and intensity: *Hey Conley, do you like pussy?* and *Hon, you just shake that off.* Reported speech often brings something specific to the narrative. For example, instead of stating that Matt's aggressors used harsh language, he quotes them in order to better demonstrate the emotional pain. Reported speech helps bring the listeners into the situation and perhaps enables them to get closer to "reliving" the experience with us.

While listeners have not gone through these situations with us, they may experience the moments somewhat vicariously through our use of reported speech. Reported speech often moves the action of our stories forward in powerful ways and also serves as a subtle form of evaluation. Matt chose to quote his classmates exclamation of "Eeeeeeeeeew" because it stands out in his memory of the event, but it also calls for the sympathy of the listener. Lesley relies on reported speech to show how possibly risky situations were resolved and to specifically describe something she has stated. For instance, she proves her colleagues' supportiveness by telling how they regularly asked about her partner: "Where are you and Penny going for dinner tonight?"

According to our review of the stories, Matt's use of reported speech functions as evaluation and leads to breakthroughs into reenactment. Lesley uses reported speech on more of a technical level to move action forward and gain credibility. In her narratives action is generally precipitated by reported speech or evaluative clauses. In general, reported speech gives insight into the strength of our memories and the emotional characteristics of the events we recall.

Emotion obviously plays a crucial role in the choices we make regarding which stories to tell and how to tell them. We cannot explore these choices without addressing the concepts of category-bound-activity and available narrative. For our analysis, we think of these as inter-related and working together. We use them to think about why we choose specific events to turn into stories and how we construct those stories. Since we placed relatively few limitations on the content of our stories, it is interesting to consider what stereotypes or categories we tap into to make these stories make sense, appeal to listeners, and satisfy ourselves. While we may be voicing these stories for the first time, we are still constrained by tellability. Our stories do not exist on their own, but rather in a context dictated by dominant and available narrative. The structure and content our stories depend on factors such as our perception of what is safe, what is available, and what is dominant. In essence, we have mapped our stories onto other stories.

Clearly, stereotypes or category-bound-activities have affected our storytelling choices. Tellability is dependent upon available and dominant narrative. Our argument is that our stories are made more *and* less accessible by the construction of sexuality in our world. Homophobia is an institutionalized form of discrimination from grade school to graduate school. Schools are generally hostile places for gay and lesbian children, parents, and teachers. Heron (1994)

contends that schools fail to provide critical information and support to families coping with issues of homosexuality. Similarly, higher education does not seem to be effectively serving the needs of gays and lesbians. Norris' (1992) study describes heterosexual orthodoxy of the campuses of several liberal arts colleges. He found that gay and lesbian students survived varying degrees of exclusion, isolation, and harassment. Incidents recently in Utah and Missouri have demonstrated that many school districts are not prepared to accept gay and lesbian teachers as a reality (Ruenzel, 1994; Walsh, 1998). According to Harbeck (1992) there is a clear history of teacher dismissal, license revocation, and restriction of free speech rights. In *One Teacher in Ten* (Jennings, 1994), gay and lesbian teachers describe how they have dealt with the conflict between their sexuality and profession. These stories reflect diverse approaches: off-handed denials when a student flippantly tries to out a teacher; answering "yes" when a student nonchalantly asks the question; deliberately coming out to a principal to be proactive; building friendships with colleagues by coming out to them and asking for confidentiality. These examples constitute the emergence of narratives about gay teachers. Similar narratives exist for gay teenagers such as those that reinforce statistics of suicide rates or stereotypical characterizations. However, only a limited number of these stories are being told, and thus they oversimplify and fail to fully or accurately represent their lives. The limited and stereotypical stories of gay teenagers struggling with identity and social acceptance and gay teachers making workplace disclosures fail to represent the fluid and dynamic nature of the many lived experiences of gays and lesbians.

Thematically, coming out stories can be inspiring or intimidating, affirming or depressing, empowering or confusing. Our stories reflect these and other characteristics from available and dominant narratives. Our narratives fit the established patterns and functions modeled by societal expectations and the narratives of others like us. We have delineated several such

characteristics:

- The need for a safe and comfortable environment and the support from others
- The finding of one's voice and development of identities
- The feelings of anxiety, anger, and fear produced by immediate hostility
- The decisions about passing and invisibility

These categories should shed light on how the stories change according to storyrealm and taleworld. The storyrealm we created is directly influenced by our perception of available narratives and reflect issues of tellability and context.

As stated before, reported speech is infused with emotion which contributes to evaluation. We rely on Linde's (1993) description of evaluation to further our analysis of how evaluation works in our narratives:

> . . . narratives crucially contain evaluations, which do not have a standard position in the structure of the narrative . The evaluative sections of the narrative represent the means that the speaker uses to convey the point of the story or to show why it is worth telling. Viewed interactionally, the evaluation is the part of the narrative that conveys to its addressees how they are to understand the meaning of the narrated sequence of events and what kind of response the speaker desires. (p. 71)

When we as tellers use phrases such as: *I was just trying to survive*; *I was angry*; *I felt rather disenfranchised*," we are asking listeners to agree with our perspective, to understand our struggles. We do not want them to have the option of dismissing our feelings. By using "I" statements like the ones above, we represent our feelings as facts to be considered by listeners as they determine meaning in our stories. Similarly, we use evaluative clauses to convince readers

that our perceptions of settings and other individuals are accurate. Evaluation guides listeners to accept and understand the judgments tellers make about situations: *she seemed truly interested in our stories.*

In our stories evaluation is sometimes used to build background knowledge or provide listeners with a sense of the context. Lesley describes her teacher education program as *more to the point, it was cohort-driven. . . Thirty of us were thrown together.* This is a heavily subjective statement which could easily have been stated quite directly and without judgment. Matt uses sarcasm to describe classroom discourse in education classes to explain the context of the decisions he had to make about coming out: *we happened to be off topic which is not uncommon in any education course I've ever taken.*

We choose to insert descriptive, opinionated, and persuasive words throughout our narratives in order to provoke a response. Our use of evaluation reveals our assumed audience to be sympathetic listeners who will not challenge our descriptions of events. Evaluation clarifies for listeners our intended message. If we consider our research to be an act of resistance or activism then we are obviously taking a stance on power dynamics and homophobia; evaluation is a manifestation of that position. Evaluation gets at how we understand our stories, our motivation for telling them, our emotional attachment to them, our biases, and our intended meaning. It gives clues to readers or listeners as to how they are supposed to interpret the story.

In our stories evaluation is used to provoke in our listeners feelings such as shock, anger, empathy, sadness, and inspiration. Why are these the emotions we play on? Certainly these are the authentic reactions we had to these events. Yet, we also have an agenda to convey to our

listeners and confirm for ourselves. Matt and Lesley use evaluation in very similar ways.

Like reported speech and evaluation, emotional aspects of our story are brought to bear through performance and reenactment. By looking at performance we are able to make generalizations about the contexts of our stories and storytelling. The relationship of tellers and listeners to the stories and to each other must be examined. Performance is the "who, where, when, and how" of narrative and interpretation. By looking at reenactment, we are able to describe how experience gets represented in narrative form. A story is a representation of experience, but the telling is an event that is ultimately performance in a particular setting and is itself another experience. Some stories are more representation and some are more reenactment. These concepts are not in contest with each other but rather inter-related and symbiotic.

Matt and Lesley share a high level of comfort and mutual respect. In our relationship as tellers there is a high level of emotional safety and camaraderie. We share assumptions about the purpose and expectations of these tellings. We are telling many of these stories for the first time. While the environment is one of safety we are still treading on uneasy ground. When we default to reported speech and evaluation, we breakthrough to reenactment. Reenactment heightens the connection we feel to the experiences being described, illuminating our community relationship and the high stakes involved in these retellings. Reenactment is important in our stories through reported speech, evaluation, and the undocumented oral sharing between the two tellers.

Our storytelling takes place in different locations such as restaurants, coffeehouses, and our own homes. Our journal writing begins with collaboration. We reread previous entries and offer new experience about which to write. Some stories demand more of us in their tellings. The

performances are influenced by such factors as: the locations of performance, our individual moods or energy levels, and our shared knowledge of our experiences.

Our stories are deeply contextualized in that the telling takes place in a deliberately constructed environment of kinship and academic growth. For our stories, performance is connected to the context of our data collection. We read our stories aloud to each other and debrief after each writing session. There is a clear understanding that as both tellers and listeners our stories will be affirmed and legitimized. Because we share a similar worldview and common experiences, truthfulness and motive are not questioned.

Another structure of narratives that we find helpful in analyzing our stories is frame. Berger (1997) describes frame as how story "provides the means of telling other stories within it" (p.65). Frame breaks occur as realm shifts between the taleworld (at the time of the event) and the storyrealm(the here and now of the telling). Frames are established through orientation which locates our narratives in a particular setting and location.

Additionally, frame breaks occur at points of emotional intensity or heightened crisis. As tellers, we step out of the tale world to describe our thinking at the time and in retrospect: *now I understand that it is more akin to; cohorts can be very powerful if they organize and rebel; should I have just remained silent; then again where has silence gotten us*? At times we step completely back into the storyrealm in our narration: *since then Veronica has been a positive force in my development as a Ph.D student.* Often our stories start off firmly grounded in the storyrealm reflecting quite obviously the context of the performance: *while teaching first grade I remember; don't remember the exact moment I first introduced Penny's name into conversation.*

Frame and orientation lead us to an analysis of realm shift and relationships between realms. Young (1987) distinguishes between taleworld and storyrealm. According to Young the taleworld exists within its own historical space and time. Listeners and tellers do not experience the taleworld in the same way. "Storyrealm is part of the intersubjective world of sociality and communication, an enclave in conversation on orienting to another realm, the tale world" (p. 16). Tellers use the storyrealm to entice the listener into the taleworld. Sometimes we abruptly break frame in order to speak outside the situation and interject evaluation. Time is often manipulated to take us away from the immediate situation, advance the action, and provide closure. The reenactment or retelling in the storyrealm differs from the actual experience of the taleworld, because we are able to ask questions, be critical of the events, and impose meaning. The performance alters the experience the story described by changing how we understand it.

Analysis

The above tools are helpful for speculating on the meaning and function of our stories. However, our analysis falls short in answering whether or not we have been successful in liberating or further marginalizing ourselves. By sharing our personal narratives, we extend our understanding of our own lives and legitimize those experiences. This project entails more than just the generation or collection of our stories of survival in educational settings, it addresses the repercussions and significance of our stories for theory and research. We understand that "decisions of which stories will be told and which suppressed not only give definition to a life but serve as a form of power" (Witherell, 1991, p.11). The absence of a collective understanding of the lives of lesbians and gay men restricts the access we have to this power. The lack of a common discourse results in gay men and lesbians failing to embrace the power of stories and

thus limits their ability to reflect critically on their experiences and beliefs related to schooling.

We believe there is indeed a "potential for contradictory explanations" (Bruner & Gorfain, 1984, p. 56) for our stories. Inherent in our stories is a challenge to dominant narratives. No fixed interpretation or established meanings can be easily discerned. We want our stories to be a form of resistance as described by Lorde (1984):

> I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. . . The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken." (p. 40).

Our goal in collecting our stories coincides with Lorde's description, and on a personal level, the act of telling has felt empowering. That feeling is not ample evidence for drawing conclusions. This process feels liberating, but we cannot rely on that feeling to generalize theory. There is not an obvious link from our actual stories to interpretation or analysis. The stories cannot be viewed in isolation or out of context thus complicating our analysis. Our decisions about tellings and the reception of the stories is subjective and interpretive.

Since our lives are ongoing, the truths of our stories change over space and time as our pasts, presents, and future merge in our narratives. This, in part, is why it is so difficult for tellers to sort out experience and make it known to listeners who have not lived it. For us, this disconnect exists in that our tellings take place within a context that features both a predominantly

heterosexual audience as well as others, like us, who have experienced similar struggles. Accordingly, authoritative meaning must be contested. Bruner and Gorfain describe this multiplicity of meanings as dialogic in nature. They remind us that

> a story cannot be viewed in isolation, as a monologic static entity, but must be seen in a dialogic or interactive framework; that is, all stories are told in voices, not just in structuralist oppositions or syntagmatic functions of action. A story is told in a dynamic chorus of styles which voice the social and ideological positions they represent. (p. 57)

We realize that our analysis of our data is but one interpretation. We, like all who read our text, negotiate truthfulness in a local, personal context. Others who read our stories may come to different conclusions than the ones we have derived. These challenging voices question the assumed authenticity of the history and biography we bring to bear in our stories. While we don't believe in an authoritative interpretation, our ownership of and personal connection to the stories entitles us to make determinations of meaning. This meaning-making reflects our interactions and transformation as tellers and listeners in both taleworld and storyrealm.

When analyzing our stories, we find our selves and the meaning we construct on the borders between the taleworld and the storyrealm. We are treading over a landscape of dangerous territory and safe spaces as we negotiate realms shifts. Tales like ours have seldom been told and have often been left unexamined. Our research allows us to tell the untold stories and avoid being interpreted by others. Similarly, the storyrealm we created is a rare and much overdue space for ourselves and our listeners. By analyzing the risks we take by reentering the taleworld and the environment we have nurtured in the storyrealm, we are able to gain a better understanding of the

meanings and functions of our stories. The existence of the taleworld is palpable in our memories and moves us to reenactment at times. It is not that we are the only ones who can touch or see or hear the taleworld, but since we were privy to the actual events we are responsible for mediating the storyrealm. Listeners gain access to the taleworld by becoming an integral part of the interactive storyrealm. The key to transforming others' understanding of our stories depends on their willingness to participate in our storyrealm and thus enter into the taleworld.

Conclusion

Grumet (1991) emphasizes that "our stories are the masks through which we can be seen, and with every telling we stop the flood and swirl of thought so someone can get a glimpse of us, and maybe catch us if they can" (p. 69). The political and sociocultural nature of our narratives make this "glimpsing" even more complex. Through our collection and emerging analysis, we are questioning the role of stories in our personal and professional lives, focusing on particular issues of power. Because of the personal nature of education, it is important that stakeholders recall, retell, and rethink who they are and what informs their experience. This process is familiar to those in the feminist movement where a similar model has been used to facilitate education and empowerment. As L. Richardson (1997) explains,

> The major metaphor of the contemporary American women's movement is 'voice' - speaking, naming, breaking silence. Telling their own stories. Journals, diaries, personal letters, autobiographies, poems, and biographies of ancestral women are forms in which women have been giving voice and creating collective identities. (p. 122)

This description of storytelling as a form of empowerment is also echoed by hooks (1989). In hooks' analysis she takes the idea of finding voice even further, describing it as a form of resistance. hooks asserts that through telling stories and speaking of one's life in the form of subject rather than object, tellers engage in what she calls "talking back" (p. 16). Talking back entails finding speech that compels listeners and gives voice to what has previously been nameless and silent. In our analysis, this phenomenon of talking back is closely linked to the use of narrative in education. The telling of our stories allows us to peel back layers of silence in order to begin the process of understanding ourselves across time as students, teacher candidates, teachers, and graduate students.

This storytelling has helped us begin to see how our identities as students, teacher candidates, teachers, and graduate students are entangled with other identities, alliances, relationships, and perceptions. As Connolly and Noumair (1997) point out, we are endlessly crossing and recrossing cultural, social, and political boundaries. The dynamics involved in personal narrative compels each participant to awaken to the "otherness" within. Within this paradigm, gays and lesbians emerge as essential members of a community transformed by the blurring of lines of demarcation. Through this process students will be able to work through issues of anger, resentment, and confusion in meaningful ways - ways that will lead to more enlightened teachers and pedagogy that promotes social justice.

Our mission has been to explore further the role of narrative in education, how researchers analyze content and generalize theory from stories, and how we can bring the tools of folklore to the field of education in practical ways. Educators at all levels are becoming more aware of the

importance of narratives and self-reflection. Our project fits into this emerging body of work. However, this territory is still new and more work needs to be done. In our research, we need to take a closer look at the similarities and differences of the tellers' individual experiences of homophobia and how it is manifested in our lives. It is crucial that we heed Young's (1987) warning that "I find myself implicated in a universe already differentiated. My experience of the world is bound up with my understandings of it" (p.1). We understand knowledge to be personally constructed, socially mediated, and inherently situated. Therefore, the analysis of our stories may seem almost intuitive, loosely formulated, and unreasonably grounded in the perspective of teller (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). In order to make meaning out of our stories, we are exploiting context over content. In our storytelling we use certain formal features to position ourselves and promote our desired response. While the tools of folklore enable us to explore those features, issues of empowerment and marginalization remain unresolved. As education scholars, these methods offer an alternative way to examine stories. The importance of personal history has been recognized and critical reflection has been accepted for it pedagogical value, but educators are still faced with the dilemma of how to invite and understand students' narratives.

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